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ABSTRACT

On the basis of theoretical reflection and personal experience, this paper offers five guidelines for fostering dialogical learning experiences in consulting in the field of communication. After a discussion of the author's dialogical learning experiences in overcoming communication problems with his father, the paper provides these guidelines: (1) call forth assumptions to make room for otherness; (2) strengthen the "I" for "Thou and I"; (3) facilitate give and take, but do not mystify dialogue; (4) help groups pause and reflect on the reality that they are creating for themselves, so that they can negotiate new realities through give and take; and (5) do not mystify yourself. (Contains 17 references.) (Author/CR)

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Fostering Dialogical Learning Experiences in Consulting

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Abstract

On the basis of theoretical reflection and personal experience five guidelines are offered for fostering dialogical learning experiences in consulting: Call forth assumptions to make room for otherness. Strengthen the I for Thou and I. Facilitate give and take, but do not mystify dialogue. Help groups pause and reflect on the reality that they are creating for themselves, so that they can negotiate new realities through give and take. Do not mystify yourself.

We can imagine an ideal moment in human communication, where persons are acknowledged and heard, as they address important issues, in a reciprocated exchange, that builds trust and creates learning. I call this ideal: dialogue. We cannot define it with finality, for dialogue is free to define itself without end. We can, however, conjecture maps to show how dialogue begins and unfolds.

Dialogue: Conceptual Influences

Much of my map-making takes place within corporations, where I am a communication consultant. It is influenced by many sources: Buber's (1970) I - Thou dialectic, Bohm's (1996) thinking about thought, and Gurvitch's (1988). reflections on the power of not understanding. Each of these sources is interpreted in light of Popper's meta-philosophy (Orr, 1990), and related to consulting through learning exercises from Isaacs (1993), Senge (1990). Schein (1993), and the MIT Dialogue Project (Elinor & Gerard, 1998). However, the most important influence on my perspective, is the work of Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner (1986), Krasner and Joyce (1995), and their Center for Contextual Family Therapy. Friedman (1998) credits this group with "the most decisive breakthrough" (p. 30) in the history of dialogical psychotherapy. However, even this view would not have its impact on me apart from one concrete experience: a life altering dialogue with my father a few years before his death.

Dialogue: An Experience

It was clear to me by mid-life that my father was an unreachable dogmatist, a person who subordinated everything in life to religion. Assuming that he would never appreciate my interests, I limited family meetings to holidays and other unavoidable requirements. When conversations did occur, I steered them to safe topics, such as sports, or daydreamed while dad exalted about a new religious convert.

In the late Eighties, friend and confidant, Barbara Krasner urged me to open a dialogue with my father as I approached mid-life, and he approached later life. I assured her that the prospect was hopeless. Beyond the insults received in youth, I recounted two recent pieces of discouraging data. First, a blowup had occurred over religion. Dad liked Jerry Falwell, and I did not. We fought about our preferences. Dad suggested that we end the fight with prayer,

while I said "no" to prayer, but opted for a respectful agreement to disagree. Dad insisted that such a liberal capitulation could only mean that I had won, and he had lost. We departed in an agitated silence.

A second incident involved an attempted compliment that seemed mindlessly disregarded. Returning from a consulting effort, I told dad that my work went well because I enjoyed public speaking, a skill I learned from him. His response indicated only a sleight twitch of reaction, accompanied by the blank stare of an unmerited rebuke. I walked away in silence convinced that all further efforts at "rejunction" (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p.213) were useless. But Krasner insisted, "you disconnected, when you had an opportunity for engagement. You might have responded to your father's silence with an observation and a question. 'Dad, I just tried to compliment you, and I don't understand your silence. I would like to know what you're thinking?'"

Several years later father and son talked together with unbelievable rapport. I was amazed that he recalled the compliment. He mused, "I was totally surprised, by your words. After you left, I turned to your mother and asked, 'Do you think that was a compliment?' We agreed that it was and told all our friends."

Many years of isolation, misconstrual, and sheer conversational boredom might have been prevented, by an earlier attempt at dialogue. In time, father and son were able to talk about the topics that divided them most, even religion. What had been debate and competition, became the telling and hearing of two spiritual journeys. The journeys did not reach ideological agreement, but their efforts, were mutually credited by father and son. The journeys became tributaries to a legacy of faith and courage for their family's succeeding generations.

Can the give and take I experienced with my father, be achieved in other spheres of social life? Can corporate people procure the benefits of dialogue? Consultants are not hired to do psychotherapy. [I don't, and others shouldn't]. However, the need for some form of corporate dialogue is increasingly recognized. This is especially true where people attempt to think outside the box, transform silo-like divisions into teams, build inter-cultural cooperation, and learn "as a way of being" (Vaill, 1996). Moreover, there is a spiritual longing in corporations for "real conversation." As Senge (Dumaine, 1994) says,

> "I believe we suffer every single day in every single business meeting we go to.... Part of us is getting killed, is really getting torn apart, but we all live in it, we can't talk about it, we can't even name it. Once people experience what a good conversation can be, they can't believe it. The German

poet Goethe said, 'Conversation is the most sublime of human experiences.' And it's true, there's no greater joy" (p. 149).

Dialogue: Guidelines for Consultation

For 15 years, I have tried to foster dialogue within organizations of varying sizes and missions. As I reflect on that experience, five principles emerge to guide future consultations.

First, call forth assumptions to make room for otherness

Consider the following client statements:

Veterinarian: "That biology consultant hates women, he didn't look at us [women] throughout his entire presentation."

Engineer: "She interrupted me, She doesn't respect my expertise. If she thought I was an expert, she would only wish to hear more of what I say."

Science supervisor: "I have no influence over those IT people. My email has gone unnoticed by them. I invited them to a meeting, but when they arrived they were silent. They didn't participate. They have no respect for my authority."

Each of these statements is made by a Ph.D. Each makes an unexamined assumption about a co-worker. The veterinarian's assumption of gender bias, the engineer's view of interruptions, and the supervisor's belief in his powerlessness are held, not as assumptions, but as objective truth. In the grip of unexamined assumptions, the Ph.D.'s were prepared to surrender work with the targets of their disparagement. They were unable to imagine another interpretation of their frustration and, therefore, they were unwilling to engage in a dialogue with their presumed antagonists. As my father could not imagine that I might be a source of compliments, or I could not see him as other than a dogmatist, they could not imagine another side to their conflicts.

The doctors were not unique in their limited views. All of us are "at any moment ... prisoners caught in the framework of our theories: our expectations; our past experiences; our language" (Popper, 1970, p. 56). A person with whom we talk is always for us, an image in our framework. But there is hope, "we can break out of our framework at any time"(56); not, however, into a state of

cleansed perception. "Admittedly, we shall find ourselves again in a framework, but it will be a bigger and roomier one; and at any moment we can break out of it again" (56). The Ph.D.'s felt genuine frustration. They were entitled to their interpretations. In fact, their assumptions might have been valid. Hopefully, however, they were able to place them in a roomier framework; one that would allow them to consider an alternate perspective, and test their preferred view through dialogue

My mission as a consultant is to help clients break into bigger and roomier frameworks; frameworks that can imagine how coworkers might be other than they seem, or problems might be other than how they are defined. Exercises that encourage clients to separate facts from assumptions, and generate other assumptions to explain the facts, give otherness a chance to unfold. Likewise, clients make room for otherness as they are asked these questions: Can you see a good intention, behind the [irritating person's] disappointing behavior? Can you see how a person before whom you feel powerless, might be intimidated by your power? Is the irritating behavior of the other person in any way sustained by what you do?

Bryan is certain that the IT people hold no respect for his power. Upon differentiating the fact "that IT was silent at the meeting," from his assumption that "silence means disrespect," Bryan makes room for otherness. IT did after all, attend the meeting! He evidently is not powerless!. He begins to consider how silence could be mediated by IT's fear of his authority. As his framework becomes roomier, he no longer depends on email to carry his messages. Perhaps, email fails to underscore the importance of his concern. He invites the IT people to discuss their sense of tne meeting. He inquires about their silence. In listening he discovers the busy context of their work. New reasons explain their remoteness; and Bryan sees alternative avenues for cooperation. He demonstrates that, "the first step in listening to others is [often] to identify the distortions and bias that filter our own cognitive processes"(Schein,1993, p.30).

Second, strengthen the I, for I and Thou

A me-you relationship, is as far from dialogue, as an I-It encounter. A doormat does not a make a good dialogical partner. Dialogue is give and take, receiving as much as giving. It is inquiry and advocacy (Senge, 1990). Without a strong I, my partner is deprived of meeting a distinctive other. In retrospect, dialogue with my father began on the day when I said "no" to his request for prayer, and he said "no" to disagreeing respectfully. In my experience, dialogue is more often destroyed by " pseudo-mutuality" (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner,

1986, p.211) than open hostility. Conversations that keep the peace, but mask hot issues, diminish both I and Thou. They "destructively entitle" (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 109) coworkers to backbiting, scapegoating, and chronic mistrust of their working relationships.

Sally's boss, June, routinely spent working hours discussing her private life with Sally. However, at the end of the day, June often reprimanded Sally, "for again, failing to complete your work on time!" Sally deplored the private talks, and felt acutely mistreated by the scoldings. After a workshop on "I - statements," Sally determined to state her case. Within a few days June delivered a familiar rebuke accompanied by an aggressive, "Sally, get into my office, NOW!"

Sally did not submit to the new round of rebuke and surrender. "I cannot allow myself to do that," she insisted, "I want to talk to you about my work, June, but not now, not here." June was silent, looked at Sally for a moment, and finally said, "Okay!" The next day the two workers met. Sally described the details of her problem with both private talks, and late day reputes. June and Sally began to write a new working contract to meet their mutual expectations.

Third, facilitate give and take, but do not mystify dialogue.

Dialogue requires discipline. Giving due consideration to others and otherness, while standing one's own ground is a prodigious challenge. Many of us lack skill in its performance. We need all the help we can get.

Fortunately, the human race is not without pioneers in dialogue. The path to its realization should not be made artificially esoteric, though the experience of dialogue may be ineffable. No school of dialogical thought can make claims to exclusive wisdom. Moreover, pedagogies used in the service of theories that do not espouse dialogue can find use and purpose within theories that do. After all, not all useful consultation focuses on dialogue. The world of I-Thou exists within a larger world of I-It . Some useful resources for the improvement of I-It transactions can be transformed to facilitate I-Thou conversations. As a consultant, I find the following practices especially helpful for fostering the sense of otherness, and the strengthening of I, that dialogue requires.

Type Talk. The opportunity for dialogue is enhanced as clients move from irritation, through imagination, to invitation. In this regard, the Myers-Briggs Inventory (Myers & Myers, 1995) is especially beneficial. For instance, an accountant declares, "I hate disorder." Her HR boss retorts, "I hate rules." The accountant fears that "pussy footers" will ruin the company, while her boss sees customers offended and teams split where "anal retentiveness" prevails. The

Inventory gives each a language for addressing the other's behavior in a more benign way. Both begin to see benefits in the other's style. Previously they saw only cause for blame, now they find ways to collaborate, and acknowledged each other's talents.

Taking a Trip to Abilene. The Abilene Paradox is Jerry Harvey's (1989) ingenious story about four family members that made a 40 mile trip to Abilene, and back, when no one wanted to go. Each assumed that the others wanted the trip and, therefore, remained silent about her own reservations. The result is a pseudo-mutual holiday of the first order.

After showing the Abilene video, I ask workshop participants, "are you now, or have you ever been on the road to Abilene?" Stories readily unfold. As the Abilene Paradox is grasped, a vision of dialogue is clarified by contrast. Most importantly, groups use the words, Road to Abilene to help build a "container" (Isaacs, 1993, p. 38) for their ongoing dialogues. That is, in a meeting that is stagnate in thought, or pseudo-mutual in tone, the question, "Are we on the road to Abilene?" can bring about a renew effort to renegotiate the members' interests and the meeting's direction.

Building on Assertiveness. Depending on its authorizing perspective, assertiveness training may serve many diverse ends. However, I-statements, DE SC scripts, calling- the-process, negative inquiry, and so forth (Drury, 1984), have opened avenues to dialogue for many of my clients. It is not the skill, but the framework in which the skill is interpreted, and how that framework is held, that determines a skill's dialogical potential.

I-statements, for example, facilitate dialogue, because they help one to own what he believes, feels, or wants without presuming to know what exists in the mind of the other. "I am confused," or "I want more direction" does not read the other's mind, as is the case with, " *you* are trying to confuse us." You-statements frequently mask requests that are needed for I and Thou to negotiate their relationship.

Likewise, *negative inquiry* chastens the masking of give and take by Abstraction Wars (Isaacs, 1993, p.30).. Persons in conflict may spend long hours labeling one another as "unfair," "lazy," and "uncooperative" without saying what they want from each other. Negative inquiry asks: where and when did I disappoint you? What is the problem you have with what I did? What do you want me to do? In this manner, abstraction and blame are replaced with claims and negotiation.

Finally, calling-the-process allows one to present an assumption as a hypothesis and ask for its testing, or offer data and ask for an explanation. The veterinarian mentioned above, might say to the apparently inattentive consultant,

"I sense that you seldom look in my direction when you address the group. Is there a reason for that? "This allows the person experiencing a problem to raise it, without presuming on the other person's state-of-mind.

Many colleagues resist teaching skills as a preparation for dialogue. They fear that a skill will be taken as a quarante of dialogue, or its substitute. This is an important warning. However, the danger is not limited to skill practice. A theory can be reified into a dogma, and a research result can take on the aura of an unqualified truth. A discussion of reification and its solution is beyond the scope of this paper (Orr, 1990). However, if concepts can be taught without becoming idols, skills can be practiced without becoming a panacea.

I believe there is an unfolding dialectic in the chronology of human relations training. Helping skills largely defined people skills in the Sixties. The focus was on active listening to the other person. The Seventies and Eighties featured assertiveness with an emphasis on the rights of the self. Today's call for dialogue seeks a greater balance between the entitlements of self and other. The emerging framework of dialogue cannot be reduced to either listening, or assertiveness. However, listening and assertiveness can serve the higher purpose of dialogue. On one occasion, I felt I lived through this evolutionary emergence.

Female Deans from prestigious universities participated in a workshop. I asked them to do the NASA survival exercise. They objected. Some made direct disparagement of maleness in general, and mine in particular. "We have more important matters to discuss," one member exclaimed. I responded with active listening and assertiveness, "I hear your view about the game, but let me share with you, my felt obligation to complete the contract for which I was hired." The critic persisted, "I hear your sense of obligation, but let me share with you, my felt obligation to object!"

It now became apparent that group members and I had learned the same assertiveness skills. Assertiveness had reached its evolutionary breaking point. "That's it, we're not playing," said a participant. Then a second break occurred. A previously silent person said, "I don't want to play the game either. But no one elected you [the previous speaker] to speak for us. I'll play!"

I wanted the game to generate group dynamics for analysis. Obviously, a rich display of group dynamics was already available. Therefore, I withdrew the game, with one request: "can we spend the rest of our time talking about what happened here this morning." What followed was a day of sharing assumptions, discussing cultural disappointments, and exploring why we made our group reality as it was. Assertiveness yielded to dialogue.

Fourth, help groups pause and reflect on the reality they are creating for themselves, so they can negotiate new realities through give and take.

Both Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner (1986, pp. 47-49), and Isaacs(1993, pp.40-42) see dialogue as a meta-viewpoint on the transactions that sustain relationships. Dialogue allows participants to take responsibility for relationship patterns, and negotiate their termination, or continence. For instance, Jane's Marketing group complained of chronic demoralization. When asked, why they felt demoralized, the unanimous response was, "Our customers don't respect us." For hours the group castigated the ungrateful customers. Then blame took a turn. The vice-president charged the president with "coddling customers." The president insisted that the vice-president was "infuriating customers, by her aggressive attitudes!" The group appeared to be giving a classic rendition of the Senge's(1990) "shifting the burden archetype"(pp. 104-114).

The next day I asked, "what can you expect from your customers?" There was a long pause. Participants began to imagine their customer's otherness. "We can expect them to pay us," was the joint reply." "So respect and morale are not part of the contract you negotiate with your customers?" "Of course not we've been stupid," said one group member. "Why do we expect respect from our customers, when we don't give it to each other?" asked another. The group began to examine assumptions that were killing its morale. Abstractions, such as, "You coddle customers" were turned into specific requests for a customer service policy. A Myers-Briggs Inventory enabled irritation to become invitation. Above all, group members advanced new ways to acknowledge each other's contributions.

A similar exchange occurred at a State operated facility for people who are mentally retarded. Staff members work delicately with people who have no other home, and in many cases only infantile abilities. In consultation I was repeatedly told by the staff, "we are a blaming culture We can't seem to stop complaining about each other and the facility." Indeed, workshops were frequently interrupted by attacks, snipes, and "isn't it awful" monologues.

One day I suggested, "Since you are so good at blaming and complaining, let me see how you do it at your best. Make something up to moan about." After some hesitancy, the familiar pattern began. Gradually, it slowed down and stopped. "What felt good about complaining, I asked?" The replies revealed interests that had not been previously addressed. "It wasn't boring. It got rid of pressure for a while. It was a break from normal work. We had a kind of bond with each other." "Why did you stop, ? I asked. "We got tired. And besides, its almost time to go home." The group began to take charge of its

complaining culture. "Complaining might not be so bad, if we put strict limits on it, no more than three minutes at a time." "We need to define ourselves more in terms of home, rather than work." "Complaint bonding is tiring, let's try celebrations."

Fifth, do not mystify yourself.

Part of the my consultant's creed reads, "Thou shalt not reify thy discipline, skill set, or view of an audience." As Popper somewhere says, "in our infinite ignorance, we are all equal." To enter dialogue, is to surrender the security of certitude. The opportunity to find dialogue in the corporate world is great, if we are willing to accept the unknown. Knowledge can impede dialogue, where it becomes a substitute for learning.

In the early 1970's it was easy to believe that I had triumphed over the religious fundamentalism of my youth and secured, through the Ph. D., a life in the humane world of academe. Here I expected to find open mindedness, a passion for learning, and a foremost commitment to the intellectual and ethical development of students. By contrast I saw the business world as greedy and thoughtless, *en mass*. My certitude about the business world was directly proportional to my absence of real conversation with its people. One of my first contacts with an HR person shattered my easy assumptions. "We," he said, "realize that the greatest need in our corporation is not training, but love for people."

One remark does not righteousness make. However, that early exchange stood in dramatic contrast to my early experience in academe, where I waited in vain to hear words of passion, or a concern for students, rather than another toxic discussion on how to gain tenure, and improve scholarship. Over the years, I have been impressed, impassioned, and intellectually sustained by hearing clients tell stories about their aspirations, their grave decisions, and their commitment to service. Years of consulting experience lead me to conclude that he who would foster dialogue, must first be surprised by its occurrence.

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